The key to the gospel is to understand the identity of Jesus. The Protestant gospel as generally understood is based on the life and “holy works” of the earthly Jesus. And right here is the problem. The New Testament gospel is based upon the ascended Jesus in heaven who now communicates with His people by presenting Himself to them as the “Spirit of Christ” to be received as an indwelling presence.

In the Protestant gospel Jesus’ contribution to the salvation of His people terminated with His ascension into heaven where He remains, by all accounts, inactive until His second coming. From a New Testament perspective this is strange doctrine; the New Testament teaches Jesus came back on the day of Pentecost.

It was on account of the presence of God in Him manifested in the daily living that Jesus could say; “Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? The words I say to you I do not speak on My own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in Me, who is doing His work.” (John 14:9-10)

The humanity of the earthly Jesus was a host for the entire presence of God in Him. The Father Himself was actually in Him along with the Spirit of God Himself who was the inner compulsion that led Jesus to the cross. As Hebrews 9:14 explains it; “Christ through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God.” Every presence of God and every encounter with God is an encounter with the totality of God.

Pentecost restored Jesus’ presence to the church. “The Spirit of Pentecost is the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit He gives is a selfsame Spirit that inspired, instructed, and animated His own life. His own, very own Spirit, which may said to be His very self.” (Samuel Chadwick, The Way to Pentecost, p.80)

Just as the heavenly Father had an earthly presence in the earthly Jesus so also the heavenly Jesus has an earthly presence in the Spirit who descended on the day of Pentecost. Speaking of the Spirit who after His ascension was to be His Other Self in the church Jesus said, when the Spirit comes “I will come to you.” (John 14:18) The Spirit who descended at Pentecost was the “Spirit of Christ” who is Christ Himself.

Justification, Jesus and the Spirit

The New Testament clearly teaches an experiential Spirit-based gospel. Paul wrote; “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ.” Paul’s meaning is that the “Spirit of Christ” is the post resurrection mode in which Jesus now makes His approach to us. Paul identified Jesus - “the last Adam” - as “a life-giving Spirit.” He teaches in plain language that in His heavenly existence the earthly Jesus is to be now known as “the Lord the Spirit.”

In Paul's gospel, speaking of Jesus, it is taught that “through Him (Jesus) we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” and according to Paul that “one Spirit” is the ascended Jesus, “the Lord the Spirit” now existing as “the Spirit of Christ.” Paul provided an insight into his doctrine of Christ when he wrote; “I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.” (Ephesians 2:18, 2Cor. 3:17, Romans 8:9, Philippians 1:19)
When the New Testament writers speak of “the Spirit of Christ”¹ “the Spirit of Jesus Christ”² and “the Spirit of Christ.”³ Their biblical salvation doctrine is based on union with the heavenly Jesus who comes to us in the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. (¹Rom. 8:9,²Phil. 1:19,³1Peter 1:11)

In the New Testament context the believers’ relationship with Christ is not based on the notion of “imputed righteousness” (as defined in Protestant teaching) but on His indwelling presence. “If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.”¹ “Do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you.”² “The riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles ... is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”³ (²Romans 8:10, ²Cor. 13:5, ³Colossians 1:27)

Peter makes reference to “the Spirit of Christ” indwelling the prophets.¹ Paul told the Corinthians, “the Lord is the Spirit.”² He also wrote; “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”³ Jesus refers to His relationship with believers as “I in them.”⁴ (¹1Peter 1:11, ²2Cor. 3:17, ³Galatians 2:20,⁴John 17:23-26)

Instead of teaching “imputed righteousness” Paul taught that when the believer receives Jesus as the Spirit of Christ they “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”¹ inwardly and he calls on them to “clothe yourselves with Christ.”² In Paul’s gospel union with Christ is worked out as oneness with Him in the Spirit: “the one who joins himself to the Lord is one Spirit with Him.”³ (¹Romans 13:4, ²Galatians 3:27, ³1Cor. 6:17)

James Dunn points out Jesus now exists for us as the “Spirit of Christ” and we receive Him as Spirit; “so far as the religious experience of Christians is concerned Jesus and the Spirit are no difference. The risen Christ may not be experienced independently of the Spirit.” (James Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit, p.323)

Many now concede that Paul has no doctrine of “imputed righteousness.” “Paul never states explicitly that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers.” (George Eldon Ladd, Theology of the NT p.491)

“In New Testament theologians' recent and current treatments of justification, you would be hard-pressed to find any discussion of an imputation of Christ's righteousness. ... The notion is passé ... New Testament theologians are now disposed to talk about the righteousness of God in terms of his salvific activity ... not in terms of imputation of Christ's righteousness in a bookkeeping framework. ... [The] doctrine that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to believing sinners needs to be abandoned.” (Robert Grundy, Why I Didn't Endorse The Gospel of Jesus Christ: http://www.ctlibrary.com/keyword.html?id=86)

There is not a single text anywhere supporting “imputed righteousness” in the writings of Paul. Romans 4:5 which is the text most cited in support of the imputed righteousness says the believers own “faith (pistis) is credited as righteousness.” (Albeit faith as an inner quality, not an outward act.) In his soteriology Paul taught we are “justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”¹ and “through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.”² (¹1Cor. 6:11,²Eph. 2:18)

Justification as Paul taught it is based on receiving the “Spirit of Christ” as an indwelling presence. And the historical fact is, Luther taught that justification comes about by a union with the living Jesus that takes place “in the Spirit.” “Hearing the proclamation of faith ... brings the Spirit who justifies.”¹ “This faith justifies you; it will cause Christ to dwell, live, and reign in you.”² “The Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life.”³ (¹LW, Vol. 26, p. 208 ²LW, Vol. 27, p.172, ³LW, Vol.26, pp.129-30)

Calvin also identified receiving the Spirit as the dynamic event at which personal justification is validated. “[S]o long as we are without Christ and separated from Him nothing which He suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which He received from the Father, He must become ours and dwell in us ... it is by the Spirit alone that He unites Himself to us.” (Institutes of the Christian Religion bk. 3, chap.1, sec.1. see also sec.3 and 4)
Imputation versus Union with the Spirit

During the *kenosis* Jesus was the bearer of the Spirit now the Spirit has become the bearer of Jesus. Jesus said, “I cast out devils by the Spirit of God.” Now it is the reverse of that, the Spirit who dwelt in Jesus is now a host for the presence of the heavenly Jesus who maintains an earthly presence as the ‘Spirit of Christ.’ Jesus is now present in the Spirit as much as the Spirit was then present in Jesus.¹ (Matt. 12:28)

Referring to Jesus Paul says, “The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam a life-giving Spirit.”² Paul says of the resurrected Jesus; “The Lord is the Spirit.”² In another place he spoke of Jesus as “the Lord, the Spirit.”³ Then as Paul explains the matter he tells us our connection to Jesus is based on our union with Him in the Spirit. “But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one Spirit with Him.”³ The result of this union is described as “justification ... in the Spirit.” “You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”⁴⁵¹Cor. 15 45, ²2 Cor. 3 17, ³2 Cor. 3 18, ⁴2Thessalonians 2:13

In his writings Paul linked receiving the Spirit (“Spirit of Christ”) specifically to receiving salvation and eternal life; “the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”² “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation ... by the Spirit.”³¹Romans 8:9 ²Galatians 6:8, ³2Thessalonians 2:13

Paul told the Galatians the essential element in the experience of salvation is to receive the Spirit who joins us to Jesus. “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts.”² Paul linked receiving “the blessing of Abraham” to “the promise of the Spirit.” He describes believers as those who “are led by the Spirit” - “live by the Spirit [and] walk by the Spirit.” (Galatians 4:6, 3:14, 5:18, 25)

Paul told the believers, “you were justified ... in the Spirit.”¹ To the Ephesians he wrote; “you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”² To the Philippians he declared; “for we are the true circumcision who worship in the Spirit of God.”³ To Titus he wrote, “He saved us ... by the renewing of the Holy Spirit.”⁴¹1Corinthians 6:17, ²Ephesians 2:22, ³Philippians 3:3, ⁴2Thess. 2:13, ⁵Titus 3:5

Paul’s doctrine of “salvation by the Spirit”¹ by receiving a living Jesus as “the Lord, the Spirit”² and “a life-giving Spirit”³ as the central doctrine of apostolic Christianity could not survive the strictures imposed by the inflexible logic of Gentile Christianity. In modern times it cannot compete with the sacred traditions of a Protestantism that believes itself to be a divine creation. (²2Thess.2:13, ²Cor.3 18, ³Rom 8:9)

According to Paul it is not an externally “imputed righteousness” but receiving Christ inwardly that authenticates our acceptance. For Paul justification is the actual experience of receiving the living Jesus as the “Spirit of Christ.” “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith ... do you not realize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you unless you fail to meet the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5)

“The Christian religion is not a set of doctrines about Christ, neither is it a rule of life based on the teachings and examples of Christ. ... It is life, and that life is a life of Christ. It is a communication of the life of the risen Lord in His body which is the church, and in the sanctified believer. “Christ living in me” is the essence of the Christian religion as set forth in the New Testament. It is not a system but a presence, the presence of Christ indwelling the spirit of man.” (Samuel Chadwick, The Way to Pentecost p.81)

Footnote The practice of placing the gospel under the rubric of a “forensic” relationship not only represents a departure from truth it represents a betrayal of truth. The gospel represents a far higher thing than a legal forgiveness. What is offered is an immersion into the very life of divinity. Paul put it this way; “God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1Corinthians 1:9) The nature of this fellowshipped is an existential participation in the life of Christ that arises out of an actual union with Christ is which Jesus and the believer share in one life force whose sole origin is Jesus Himself. The notion that the believers internal dynamics are energised by a Higher Self who has merged with their self is the concrete meaning of Galatians 2:20; “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” That is the gospel and nothing less than that is.

“Christ's true followers will represent Him in character... The doing of the living principles of God's law makes them one with Christ; and because He lives, they will live also. At the last day He will raise them as a part of Himself.” (RH June 18, 1901)